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# THE COURSE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

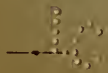
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An Address delivered at the Semi-Centennial Anniversary of the New  
Jersey Historical Society, Newark, N. J.,  
May 16th, 1895.

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BY WOODROW WILSON, PH. D., LL. D.

Professor of Jurisprudence in Princeton University.



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## The Course of American History.

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In the field of history learning should be deemed to stand among the people and in the midst of life. Its function there is not one of pride merely: to make complaisant record of deeds honorably done and plans nobly executed in the past. It has also a function of guidance: to build high places whereon to plant the clear and flaming lights of experience, that they may shine alike upon the roads already traveled and upon the paths not yet attempted. The historian is also a sort of prophet. Our memories direct us. They give us knowledge of our character, alike in its strength and in its weakness: and it is so we get our standards for endeavour,—our warnings and our gleams of hope. It is thus we learn what manner of nation we are of, and divine what manner of people we should be.

And this is not in national records merely. Local history is the ultimate substance of national history. There could be no epics were pastorals not also true,—no patriotism, were there no homes, no neighbours, no quiet round of civic duty; and I, for my part, do not wonder that scholarly men have been found not a few who, though they might have shone upon a larger field, where all eyes would have seen them win their fame, yet chose to pore all their lives long upon the blurred and scattered records of a country-side, where there was nothing but an old church or an ancient village. The history of a nation is only the history of its villages written large. I only marvel that these local historians have not seen more in the stories they have sought to tell. Surely here, in these old hamlets that ante-date the cities, in these little communities

that stand apart and yet give their young life to the nation, is to be found the very authentic stuff of romance for the mere looking. There is love and courtship and eager life and high devotion up and down all the lines of every genealogy. What strength, too, and bold endeavour in the cutting down of forests to make the clearings; what breath of hope and discovery in scaling for the first time the nearest mountains; what longings ended or begun upon the coming in of ships into the harbour; what pride of earth in the rivalries of the village; what thoughts of heaven in the quiet of the rural church! What forces of slow and steadfast endeavour there were in the building of a great city upon the foundations of a hamlet: and how the plot broadens and thickens and grows dramatic as communities widen into States! Here, surely, sunk deep in the very fibre of the stuff, are the colours of the great story of men, —the lively touches of reality and the striking images of life.

It must be admitted, I know, that local history can be made deadly dull in the telling. The men who reconstruct it seem usually to build with kiln-dried stuff,—as if with a purpose it should last! But that is not the fault of the subject. National history may be written almost as ill, if due pains be taken to dry it out. It is a trifle more difficult: because merely to speak of national affairs is to give hint of great forces and of movements blown upon by all the airs of the wide continent. The mere largeness of the scale lends to the narrative a certain dignity and spirit. But some men will manage to be dull though they should speak of creation. In the writing of local history the thing is fatally easy. For there is some neighbourhood history that lacks any large significance, which is without horizon or outlook. There are details in the history of every community which it concerns no man to know again when once they are past and decently buried in the records; and

these are the very details, no doubt, which it is easiest to find upon a casual search. It is easier to make out a list of county clerks than to extract the social history of the county from the records they have kept,—though it is not so important: and it is easier to make a catalogue of anything than to say what of life and purpose the catalogue stands for. This is called collecting facts “for the sake of facts themselves;” but if I wished to do aught for the sake of the facts themselves I think I should serve them better by giving their true biographies than by merely displaying their faces.

The right and vital sort of local history is the sort which may be written with lifted eyes,—the sort which has an horizon and an outlook upon the world. Sometimes it may happen, indeed, that the annals of a neighbourhood disclose some singular adventure which had its beginning and its ending there: some unwonted bit of fortune which stands unique and lonely amidst the myriad transactions of the wide world of affairs, and deserves to be told singly and for its own sake. But usually the significance of local history is, that it is part of a greater whole. A spot of local history is like an inn upon a highway: it is a stage upon a far journey: it is a place the national history has passed through. There mankind has stopped and lodged by the way. Local history is thus less than national history only as the part is less than the whole. The whole could not dispense with the part, would not exist without it, could not be understood unless the part were also understood. Local history is subordinate to national only in the sense in which each leaf of a book is subordinate to the volume itself. Upon no single page will the whole theme of the book be found; but each page holds a part of the theme. Even were the history of each locality exactly like the history of every other (which it cannot be), it would deserve to be written,—if only to corroborate the history of

the rest, and verify it as an authentic part of the record of the race and nation. The common elements of a nation's life are the great elements of its life, the warp and woof of the fabric. They cannot be too much or too substantially verified and explicated. It is so that our history is made solid and fit for use and wear.

Our national history has, of course, its own great and spreading pattern, which can be seen in its full form and completeness only when the stuff of our national life is laid before us in broad surfaces and upon an ample scale. But the detail of the pattern, the individual threads of the great fabric, are to be found only in local history. There is all the intricate weaving, all the delicate shading, all the nice refinement of the pattern,—gold thread mixed with fustian, fine thread laid upon coarse, shade combined with shade. Assuredly it is this that gives to local history its life and importance. The idea, moreover, furnishes a nice criterion of interest. The life of some localities is, obviously, more completely and intimately a part of the national pattern than the life of other localities, which are more separate and, as it were, put upon the border of the fabric. To come at once and very candidly to examples, the local history of the Middle States,—New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania,—is much more structurally a part of the characteristic life of the nation as a whole than is the history of New England communities or of the several States and regions of the South. I know that such a heresy will sound very rank in the ears of some: for I am speaking against accepted doctrine. But acceptance, be it never so general, does not make a doctrine true.

Our national history has been written for the most part by New England men,—all honor to them! Their scholarship and their characters alike have given them an honorable enrolment amongst the great names of our literary history; and no just man would say aught to detract, were



it never so little, from their well-earned fame. They have written our history, nevertheless, from but a single point of view. From where they sit, the whole of the great development looks like an Expansion of New England. Other elements but play along the sides of the great process by which the Puritan has worked out the development of nation and polity. It is he who has gone out and possessed the land; the man of destiny, the type and impersonation of a chosen people. To the Southern writer, too, the story looks much the same, if it be but followed to its culmination,—to its final storm and stress and tragedy in the great war. It is the history of the Suppression of the South. Spite of all her splendid contributions to the steadfast accomplishment of the great task of building the nation; spite of the long leadership of her statesmen in the national counsels; spite of her joint achievements in the conquest and occupation of the West, the South was at last turned upon on every hand, rebuked, proscribed, defeated. The history of the United States, we have learned, was, from the settlement at Jamestown to the surrender at Appomattox, a long-drawn contest for mastery between New England and the South,—and the end of the contest we know. All along the parallels of latitude ran the rivalry, in those heroical days of toil and adventure during which population crossed the continent, like an army advancing its encampments. Up and down the great river of the continent, too, and beyond, up the slow incline of the vast steppes that lift themselves toward the crowning towers of the Rockies,—beyond that, again, in the gold-fields and upon the green plains of California, the race for ascendancy struggled on,—till at length there was a final coming face to face, and the masterful folk who had come from the loins of New England won their consummate victory.

It is a very dramatic form for the story. One almost wishes it were true. How fine a unity it would give our epic! But perhaps, after all, the real truth is more interesting. The life of the nation cannot be reduced to these so simple terms. These two great forces, of the North and of the South, unquestionably existed,—were unquestionably projected in their operation out upon the great plane of the continent, there to combine or repel, as circumstances might determine. But the people that went out from the North were not an unmixed people; they came from the great Middle States as well as from New England. Their transplantation into the West was no more a reproduction of New England or New York or Pennsylvania or New Jersey than Massachusetts was a reproduction of old England, or New Netherland a reproduction of Holland. The Southern people, too, whom they met by the Western rivers and upon the open prairies, were transformed, as they themselves were, by the rough fortunes of the frontier. A mixture of peoples, a modification of mind and habit, a new round of experiment and adjustment amidst the novel life of the baked and untilled plain, and the far valleys with the virgin forests still thick upon them: a new temper, a new spirit of adventure, a new impatience of restraint, a new license of life,—these are the characteristic notes and measures of the time when the nation spread itself at large upon the continent, and was transformed from a group of colonies into a family of States.

The passes of these eastern mountains were the arteries of the nation's life. The real breath of our growth and manhood came into our nostrils when first, like Governor Spotswood and that gallant company of Virginian gentlemen that rode with him in the far year 1716, the Knights of the Order of the Golden Horseshoe, our pioneers stood upon the ridges of the eastern hills and looked down upon

those reaches of the continent where lay the untrodden paths of the westward migration. There, upon the courses of the distant rivers that gleamed before them in the sun, down the farther slopes of the hills beyond, out upon the broad fields that lay upon the fertile banks of the "Father of Waters," up the long tilt of the continent to the vast hills that looked out upon the Pacific—there were the regions in which, joining with people from every race and clime under the sun, they were to make the great compounded nation whose liberty and mighty works of peace were to cause all the world to stand at gaze. Thither were to come Frenchmen, Scandinavians, Celts, Dutch, Slavs,—men of the Latin races and of the races of the Orient, as well as men, a great host, of the first stock of the settlements: English, Scots, Scots-Irish,—like New England men, but touched with the salt of humor, hard, and yet neighborly too. For this great process of growth by grafting, of modification no less than of expansion,—the colonies,—the original thirteen States,—were only preliminary studies and first experiments. But the experiments that most resembled the great methods by which we peopled the continent from side to side and knit a single polity across all its length and breadth, were surely the experiments made from the very first in the Middle States of our Atlantic seaboard.

Here, from the first, were mixture of population, variety of element, combination of type, as if of the nation itself in small. Here was never a simple body, a people of but a single blood and extraction. a polity and a practice brought straight from one motherland. The life of these States was from the beginning like the life of the country: they have always shown the national pattern. In New England and the South it was very different. There some of the great elements of the national life were long in preparation: but separately and with an individual distinc-

tion: without mixture,—for long almost without movement. That the elements thus separately prepared were of the greatest importance, and run everywhere like the chief threads of the pattern through all our subsequent life, who can doubt? They give color and tone to every part of the figure. The very fact that they are so distinct and separately evident throughout, the very emphasis of individuality they carry with them, but proves their distinct origin. The other elements of our life, various though they be, and of the very fibre, giving toughness and consistency to the fabric, are merged in its texture, united, confused, almost indistinguishable, so thoroughly are they mixed, intertwined, interwoven, like the essential strands of the stuff itself: but these of the Puritan and the Southerner, though they run everywhere with the rest and seem upon a superficial view themselves the body of the cloth, in fact modify rather than make it.

What, in fact, has been the course of American history? How is it to be distinguished from European history? What features has it of its own, which give it its distinctive plan and movement? We have suffered, it is to be feared, a very serious limitation of view until recent years by having all our history written in the East. It has smacked strongly of a local flavor. It has concerned itself too exclusively with the origins and Old-World derivations of our story. Our historians have made their march from the sea with their heads over shoulder, their gaze always backward upon the landing places and homes of the first settlers. In spite of the steady immigration, with its persistent tide of foreign blood, they have chosen to speak often and to think always of our people as sprung after all from a common stock, bearing a family likeness in every branch, and following all the while old, familiar, family ways. The view is the more misleading because it is so large a part of the truth without being all of it. The com-

mon British stock did first make the country, and has always set the pace. There were common institutions up and down the coast; and these had formed and hardened for a persistent growth before the great westward migration began which was to re-shape and modify every element of our life. The national government itself was set up and made strong by success while yet we lingered for the most part upon the eastern coast and feared a too distant frontier.

But, the beginnings once safely made, change set in apace. Not only so: there had been slow change from the first. We have no frontier now, we are told,—except a broken fragment, it may be, here and there in some barren corner of the western lands, where some inhospitable mountain still shoulders us out, or where men are still lacking to break the baked surface of the plains, and occupy them in the very teeth of hostile nature. But at first it was all frontier,—a mere strip of settlements stretched precariously upon the sea-edge of the wilds: an untouched continent in front of them, and behind them an unfrequented sea that almost never showed so much as the momentary gleam of a sail. Every step in the slow process of settlement was but a step of the same kind as the first, an advance to a new frontier like the old. For long we lacked, it is true, that new breed of frontiersmen born in after years beyond the mountains. Those first frontiersmen had still a touch of the timidity of the Old World in their blood: they lacked the frontier heart. They were “Pilgrims” in very fact,—exiled, not at home. Fine courage they had: and a steadfastness in their bold design which it does a faint-hearted age good to look back upon. There was no thought of drawing back. Steadily, almost calmly, they extended their seats. They built homes, and deemed it certain their children would live there after them. But they did not love the rough, uneasy life for its own sake.

How long did they keep, if they could, within sight of the sea! The wilderness was their refuge; but how long before it became their joy and hope! Here was their destiny cast; but their hearts lingered and held back. It was only as generations passed and the work widened about them that their thought also changed, and a new thrill sped along their blood. Their life had been new and strange from their first landing in the wilderness. Their houses, their food, their clothing, their neighborhood dealings were all such as only the frontier brings. Insensibly they were themselves changed. The strange life became familiar; their adjustment to it was at length unconscious and without effort; they had no plans which were not inseparably a part and product of it. But, until they had turned their backs once for all upon the sea; until they saw their western borders cleared of the French; until the mountain passes had grown familiar, and the lands beyond the central and constant theme of their hope, the goal and dream of their young men, they did not become an American people.

When they did, the great determining movement of our history began. The very visages of the people changed. That alert movement of the eye, that openness to every thought of enterprise or adventure, that nomadic habit which knows no fixed home and has plans ready to be carried any whither,—all the marks of the authentic type of the "American" as we know him came into our life. The crack of the whip and the song of the teamster, the heaving chorus of boatmen poling their heavy rafts upon the rivers, the laughter of the camp, the sound of bodies of men in the still forests, became the characteristic notes in our air. Our roughened race, embrowned in the sun, hardened in manner by a coarse life of change and danger, loving the rude woods and the crack of the rifle, living to begin something new every day, striking with the broad



and open hand, delicate in nothing but the touch of the trigger, leaving cities in its track as if by accident rather than design, settling again to the steady ways of a fixed life only when it must: such was the American people whose achievement it was to be to take possession of their continent from end to end ere their national government was a single century old. The picture is a very singular one! Settled life and wild side by side: civilization frayed at the edges,—taken forward in rough and ready fashion, with a song and swagger,—not by statesmen, but by woodsmen and drovers, with axes and whips and rifles in their hands, clad in buckskin, like huntsmen.

It has been said that we have here repeated some of the first processes of history: that the life and methods of our frontiersmen take us back to the fortunes and hopes of the men who crossed Europe when her forests, too, were still thick upon her. But the difference is really very fundamental, and much more worthy of remark than the likeness. Those shadowy masses of men whom we see moving upon the face of the earth in the far away, questionable days when states were forming: even those stalwart figures we see so well as they emerge from the deep forests of Germany, to displace the Roman in all his western provinces and set up the states we know and marvel upon at this day, show us men working their new work at their own level. They do not turn back a long cycle of years from the old and settled states, the ordered cities, the tilled fields, and the elaborated governments of an ancient civilization, to begin as it were once more at the beginning. They carry alike their homes and their states with them in the camp and upon the ordered march of the host. They are men of the forest, or else men hardened always to take the sea in open boats. They live no more roughly in the new lands than in the old. The world has been frontier for them from the first. They may go for-

ward with their life in these new seats from where they left off in the old. How different the circumstances of our first settlement and the building of new states on this side the sea! Englishmen, bred in law and ordered government ever since the Norman lawyers were followed a long five hundred years ago across the narrow seas by those masterful administrators of the strong Plantagenet race, leave an ancient realm and come into a wilderness where states have never been; leave a land of art and letters, which saw but yesterday "the spacious times of great Elizabeth," where Shakespeare still lives in the gracious leisure of his closing days at Stratford, where cities teem with trade and men go bravely dight in cloth of gold, and turn back six centuries,—nay, a thousand years and more,—to the first work of building states in a wilderness! They bring the steadied habits and sobered thoughts of an ancient realm into the wild air of an untouched continent. The weary stretches of a vast sea lie, like a full thousand years of time, between them and the life in which till now all their thought was bred. Here they stand, as it were, with all their tools left behind, centuries struck out of their reckoning, driven back upon the long dormant instincts and forgotten craft of their race, not used this long age. Look how singular a thing: the work of a primitive race, the thought of a civilized! Hence the strange, almost grotesque groupings of thought and affairs in that first day of our history. Subtile politicians speak the phrases and practice the arts of intricate diplomacy from council chambers placed within log huts within a clearing. Men in ruffs and lace and polished shoe-buckles thread the lonely glades of primeval forests. The microscopical distinctions of the schools, the thin notes of a metaphysical theology, are woven in and out through the labyrinths of grave sermons that run hours long upon the still air of the wilderness. Belief in dim



refinements of dogma is made the test for man or woman who seeks admission to a company of pioneers. When went there by an age since the great flood when so singular a thing was seen as this: thousands of civilized men suddenly rusticated and bade do the work of primitive peoples,—Europe *frontiered*!

Of course there was a deep change wrought, if not in these men, at any rate in their children; and every generation saw the change deepen. It must seem to every thoughtful man a notable thing how, while the change was wrought, the simples of things complex were revealed in the clear air of the New World: how all accidentals seemed to fall away from the structure of government, and the simple first principles were laid bare that abide always; how social distinctions were stripped off, shown to be the mere cloaks and masks they were, and every man brought once again to a clear realization of his actual relations to his fellows! It was as if trained and sophisticated men had been rid of a sudden of their sophistication and of all the theory of their life and left with nothing but their discipline of faculty, a schooled and sobered instinct. And the fact that we kept always, for close upon three hundred years, a like element in our life, a frontier people always in our van, is, so far, the central and determining fact of our national history. "East" and "West," an ever-changing line, but an unvarying experience and a constant leaven of change working always within the body of our folk. Our political, our economic, our social life has felt this potent influence from the wild border all our history through. The "West" is the great word of our history. The "Westerner" has been the type and master of our American life. Now at length, as I have said, we have lost our frontier: our front lies almost unbroken along all the great coast line of the western sea. The Westerner, in some day soon to come, will pass out of our life, as he so

long ago passed out of the life of the Old World. Then a new epoch will open for us. Perhaps it has opened already. Slowly we shall grow old, compact our people, study the delicate adjustments of an intricate society, and ponder the niceties, as we have hitherto pondered the bulks and structural framework, of government. Have we not, indeed, already come to these things? But the past we know. We can "see it steady and see it whole;" and its central movement and motive are gross and obvious to the eye.

Till the first century of the Constitution is rounded out we stand, all the while, in the presence of that stupendous westward movement which has filled the continent: so vast, so various, at times so tragical, so swept by passion. Through all the long time there has been a line of rude settlements along our front wherein the same tests of power and of institutions were still being made that were made first upon the sloping banks of the rivers of old Virginia and within the long sweep of the Bay of Massachusetts. The new life of the West has reacted all the while,—who shall say how powerfully,—upon the older life of the East: and yet the East has moulded the West as if she sent forward to it through every decade of the long process the chosen impulses and suggestions of history. The West has taken strength, thought, training, selected aptitudes out of the old treasures of the East,—as if out of a new Orient; while the East has itself been kept fresh, vital, alert, originative by the West, her blood quickened all the while, her youth through every age renewed. Who can say in a word, in a sentence, in a volume, what destinies have been variously wrought, with what new examples of growth and energy, while, upon this unexampled scale, community has passed beyond community across the vast reaches of this great continent!

The great process is the more significant because it has been distinctively a national process. Until the Union was formed and we had consciously set out upon a separate national career, we moved but timidly across the nearer hills. Our most remote settlements lay upon the rivers and in the open glades of Tennessee and Kentucky. It was in the years that immediately succeeded the war of 1812 that the movement into the West began to be a mighty migration. Till then our eyes had been more often in the East than in the West. Not only were foreign questions to be settled and our standing among the nations to be made good, but we still remained acutely conscious and deliberately conservative of our Old-World connections. For all we were so new a people and lived so simple and separate a life, we had still the sobriety and the circumspect fashions of action that belong to an old society. We were, in government and manners, but a disconnected part of the world beyond the seas. Its thought and habit still set us our standards of speech and action. And this, not because of imitation, but because of actual and long-abiding political and social connection with the mother country. Our statesmen,—strike but the names of Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry from the list, together with all like untutored spirits, who stood for the new, unreverencing ardor of a young democracy,—our statesmen were such men as might have taken their places in the House of Commons or in the Cabinet at home as naturally and with as easy an adjustment to their place and task as in the Continental Congress or in the immortal Constitutional Convention. Think of the stately ways and the grand air and the authoritative social understandings of the generation that set the new government afoot,—the generation of Washington and John Adams. Think, too, of the conservative tradition that guided all the early history of that government: that early line of gentlemen

Presidents: that steady "cabinet succession to the Presidency" which came at length to seem almost like an oligarchy to the impatient men who were shut out from it. The line ended, with a sort of chill, in stiff John Quincy Adams, too cold a man to be a people's prince after the old order of Presidents; and the year 1829, which saw Jackson come in, saw the old order go out.

The date is significant. Since the war of 1812, undertaken as if to set us free to move westward, seven States had been admitted to the Union: and the whole number of States was advanced to twenty-four. Eleven new States had come into partnership with the old thirteen. The voice of the West rang through all our counsels; and, in Jackson, the new partners took possession of the Government. It is worth while to remember how men stood amazed at the change: how startled, chagrined, dismayed the conservative States of the East were at the revolution they saw effected, the riot of change they saw set in; and no man who has once read the singular story can forget how the eight years Jackson reigned saw the Government, and politics themselves, transformed. For long, —the story being written in the regions where the shock and surprise of the change was greatest,—the period of this momentous revolution was spoken of amongst us as a period of degeneration, the birth-time of a deep and permanent demoralization in our politics. But we see it differently now. Whether we have any taste or stomach for that rough age or not, however much we may wish that the old order might have stood, the generation of Madison and Adams have been prolonged, and the good tradition of the early days handed on unbroken and unsullied, we now know that what the nation underwent in that day of change was not degeneration, great and perilous as were the errors of the time, but regeneration. The old order was changed, once and for all. A new nation stepped,

with a touch of swagger, upon the stage,—a nation which had broken alike with the traditions and with the wisely wrought experience of the Old World, and which, with all the haste and rashness of youth, was minded to work out a separate policy and destiny of its own. It was a day of hazards, but there was nothing sinister at the heart of the new plan. It was a wasteful experiment, to fling out, without wise guides, upon untried ways; but an abounding continent afforded enough and to spare even for the wasteful. It was sure to be so with a nation that came out of the secluded vales of a virgin continent. It was the bold frontier voice of the West sounding in affairs. The timid shivered, but the robust waxed strong and rejoiced, in the tonic air of the new day.

It was then we swung out into the main paths of our history. The new voices that called us were first silvery, like the voice of Henry Clay, and spoke old familiar words of eloquence. The first spokesmen of the West even tried to con the classics, and spoke incongruously in the phrases of politics long dead and gone to dust, as Benton did. But presently the tone changed, and it was the truculent and masterful accents of the real frontiersman that rang dominant above the rest, harsh, impatient, and with an evident dash of temper. The East slowly accustomed itself to the change; caught the movement, though it grumbled and even trembled at the pace; and managed most of the time to keep in the running. But it was always henceforth to be the West that set the pace. There is no mistaking the questions that have ruled our spirits as a nation during the present century. The public land question, the tariff question, and the question of slavery,—these dominate from first to last. It was the West that made each one of these the question that it was. Without the free lands to which every man who chose might go, there would not have been that easy prosperity of life and

that high standard of abundance which seemed to render it necessary that, if we were to have manufactures and a diversified industry at all, we should foster new undertakings by a system of protection which would make the profits of the factory as certain and as abundant as the profits of the farm. It was the constant movement of the population, the constant march of wagon trains into the West, that made it so cardinal a matter of policy whether the great national domain should *be* free land or not: and that was the land question. It was the settlement of the West that transformed slavery from an accepted institution into passionate matter of controversy.

Slavery within the States of the Union stood sufficiently protected by every solemn sanction the Constitution could afford. No man could touch it there, think, or hope, or purpose what he might. But where new States were to be made it was not so. There at every step choice must be made: slavery or no slavery?—a new choice for every new State: a fresh act of origination to go with every fresh act of organization. Had there been no Territories, there could have been no slavery question, except by revolution and contempt of fundamental law. But with a continent to be peopled, the choice thrust itself insistently forward at every step and upon every hand. This was the slavery question: not what should be done to reverse the past, but what should be done to redeem the future. It was so men of that day saw it,—and so also must historians see it. We must not mistake the programme of the Anti-Slavery Society for the platform of the Republican party, or forget that the very war itself was begun ere any purpose of abolition took shape amongst those who were statesmen and in authority. It was a question, not of freeing men, but of preserving a Free Soil. Kansas showed us what the problem was, not South Carolina: and it was



the Supreme Court, not the slave-owners, who formulated the matter for our thought and purpose.

And so, upon every hand and throughout every national question, was the commerce between East and West made up: that commerce and exchange of ideas, inclinations, purposes, and principles which has constituted the moving force of our life as a nation. Men illustrate the operation of these singular forces better than questions can: and no man illustrates it better than Abraham Lincoln.

“Great captains with their guns and drums  
Disturb our judgment for the hour;  
But at last silence comes:  
These all are gone, and, standing like a tower,  
Our children shall behold his fame,  
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,  
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise not blame,  
New birth of our new soil, the first American.”

It is a poet's verdict; but it rings in the authentic tone of the seer. It must also be the verdict of history. He would be a rash man who should say he understood Abraham Lincoln. No doubt natures deep as his, and various almost to the point of self-contradiction, can be sounded only by the judgment of men of a like sort,—if any such there be. But some things we all may see and judge concerning him. You have in him the type and flower of our growth. It is as if Nature had made a typical American, and then had added with liberal hand the royal quality of genius, to show us what the type could be. Lincoln owed nothing to his birth, everything to his growth: had no training save what he gave himself; no nurture, but only a wild and native strength. His life was his schooling, and every day of it gave to his character a new touch of development. His manhood not only, but his perception also, expanded with his life. His eyes, as they looked more and more abroad, beheld the national life, and comprehended it: and the lad who had been so rough-cut a pro-

vincial became, when grown to manhood, the one leader in all the nation who held the whole people singly in his heart:—held even the Southern people there, and would have won them back. And so we have in him what we must call the perfect development of native strength, the rounding out and nationalization of the provincial. Andrew Jackson was a type, not of the nation, but of the West. For all the tenderness there was in the stormy heart of the masterful man, and staunch and simple loyalty to all who loved him, he learned nothing in the East; kept always the flavor of the rough school in which he had been bred: was never more than a frontier soldier and gentleman. Lincoln differed from Jackson by all the length of his unmatched capacity to learn. Jackson could understand only men of his own kind; Lincoln could understand men of all sorts and from every region of the land: seemed himself, indeed, to be all men by turns, as mood succeeded mood in his strange nature. He never ceased to stand, in his bony angles, the express image of the ungainly frontiersman. His mind never lost the vein of coarseness that had marked him grossly when a youth. And yet how he grew and strengthened in the real stuff of dignity and greatness: how nobly he could bear himself without the aid of grace! He kept always the shrewd and seeing eye of the woodsman and the hunter, and the flavor of wild life never left him: and yet how easily his view widened to great affairs: how surely he perceived the value and the significance of whatever touched him and made him neighbor to itself!

Lincoln's marvellous capacity to extend his comprehension to the measure of what he had in hand is the one distinguishing mark of the man: and to study the development of that capacity in him is little less than to study, where it is as it were perfectly registered, the national life itself. This boy lived his youth in Illinois when it was a



frontier State. The youth of the State was coincident with his own: and man and his State kept equal pace in their striding advance to maturity. The frontier population was an intensely political population. It felt to the quick the throb of the nation's life,—for the nation's life ran through it, going its eager way to the westward. The West was not separate from the East. Its communities were every day receiving fresh members from the East, and the fresh impulse of direct suggestion. Their blood flowed to them straight from the warmest veins of the older communities. More than that, elements which were separated in the East were mingled in the West; which displayed to the eye as it were a sort of epitome of the most active and permanent forces of the national life. In such communities as these Lincoln mixed daily from the first with men of every sort and from every quarter of the country. With them he discussed neighborhood politics, the politics of the State, the politics of the nation,—and his mind became travelled as he talked. How plainly amongst such neighbors, there in Illinois, must it have become evident that national questions were centring more and more in the West as the years went by: coming as it were to meet them. Lincoln went twice down the Mississippi, upon the slow rafts that carried wares to its mouth, and saw with his own eyes, so used to look directly and point-blank upon men and affairs, characteristic regions of the South. He worked his way slowly and sagaciously, with that larger sort of sagacity which so marked him all his life, into the active business of State politics; sat twice in the State legislature, and then for a term in Congress,—his sensitive and seeing mind open all the while to every turn of fortune and every touch of nature in the moving affairs he looked upon. All the while, too, he continued to canvass, piece by piece, every item of politics, as of old, with his neighbors, familiarly around the stove, or upon the cor-

ners of the street, or more formally upon the stump; and kept always in direct contact with the ordinary views of ordinary men. Meanwhile he read, as nobody else around him read, and sought to gain a complete mastery over speech, with the conscious purpose to prevail in its use: derived zest from the curious study of mathematical proof, and amusement as well as strength from the practice of clean and naked statements of truth. It was all irregularly done, but strenuously, with the same instinct throughout, and with a steady access of facility and power. There was no sudden leap for this man, any more than for other men, from crudeness to finished power, from an understanding of the people of Illinois to an understanding of the people of the United States. And thus he came at last, with infinite pains and a wonder of endurance to his great national task with a self-trained capacity which no man could match, and made upon a scale as liberal as the life of the people. You could not then set this athlete a pace in learning or in perceiving that was too hard for him. He knew the people and their life as no other man did or could: and now stands in his place singular in all the annals of mankind, the "brave, sagacious, foreseeing, patient man" of the people, "new birth of our new soil, the first American."

We have here a national man presiding over sectional men. Lincoln understood the East better than the East understood him or the people from whom he sprung: and this is every way a very noteworthy circumstance. For my part, I read a lesson in the singular career of this great man. Is it possible the East remains sectional while the West broadens to a wider view?

"Be strong-backed, brown-handed, upright as your pines;  
By the scale of a hemisphere shape your designs,"

is an inspiring programme for the woodsman and the pioneer; but how are you to be brown-handed in a city

office? What if you never see the upright pines? How are you to have so big a purpose on so small a part of the hemisphere? As it has grown old, unquestionably, the East has grown sectional. There is no suggestion of the prairie, in its city streets, or of the embrowned ranchman and farmer in its well-dressed men. Its ports teem with shipping from Europe and the Indies. Its newspapers run upon the themes of an Old World. It hears of the great plains of the continent as of foreign parts, which it may never think to see except from a car window. Its life is self-centred and selfish. The West, save where special interests centre (as in those pockets of silver where men's eyes catch as it were an eager gleam from the very ore itself): the West is in less danger of sectionalization. Who shall say in that wide country where one region ends and another begins, or, in that free and changing society, where one class ends and another begins?

This, surely, is the moral of our history. The East has spent and been spent for the West: has given forth her energy, her young men and her substance, for the new regions that have been a-making all the century through. But has she learned as much as she has taught, or taken as much as she has given? Look what it is that has now at last taken place. The westward march has stopped, upon the final slopes of the Pacific; and now the plot thickens. Populations turn upon their old paths; fill in the spaces they passed by neglected in their first journey in search of a land of promise; settle to a life such as the East knows as well as the West,—nay, much better. With the change, the pause, the settlement, our people draw into closer groups, stand face to face, to know each other and be known; and the time has come for the East to learn in her turn: to broaden her understanding of political and economic conditions of the scale of a hemisphere, as her own poet bade. Let us be sure that we get the national

temperament; send our minds abroad upon the continent, become neighbors to all the people that live upon it, and lovers of them all, as Lincoln was.

Read but your history aright, and you shall not find the task too hard. Your own local history, look but deep enough, tells the tale you must take to heart. Here upon our own seaboard, as truly as ever in the West, was once a national frontier, with an elder East beyond the seas. Here, too, various peoples combined, and elements separated elsewhere effected a tolerant and wholesome mixture. Here, too, the national stream flowed full and strong, bearing a thousand things upon its currents. Let us resume and keep the vision of that time: know ourselves, our neighbors, our destiny, with lifted and open eyes: see our history truly, in its great proportions: be ourselves liberal as the great principles we profess; and so be a people who might have again the heroic adventures and do again the heroic work of the past. 'Tis thus we shall renew our youth and secure our age against decay.









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